DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 461 SO 024 774

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TITLE Social Studies "on the Backburner": Views from the Field.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 42p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Curriculum Evaluation; Educational Methods; *Educational Objectives; *Educational Practices; Educational Research; Educational Trends; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Curriculum; Elementary School Teachers; *Social Studies; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Delaware

ABSTRACT

It is the view of this research paper that elementary social studies is "on the backburner" in school classrooms. Data were gathered by four means: (1) a statewide survey of 15 of the 19 Delaware public school districts to gather responses from social studies supervisors or their equivalents; (2) a statewide survey of elementary school representatives, including teachers and principals; (3) qualitative interviews of 20 teachers throughout the state; and (4) the collection and review of state documents, including state and district curriculum guides and state census information. The study suggests a heavy competition for resources, low student interest and teacher concern, and a highly sanitized and educationally uneven curriculum are among the conditions underlying the underrepresentation and undervaluing of social studies in the curriculum. Limited opportunity for substantive social development of students is the most important effect of this lack of emphasis in the elementary classrooms. To increase the importance of social studies in the elementary schools will require an understanding of the interrelated nature of the underlying conditions of the classroom and an appreciation of the classroom practitioners' influence upon curriculum and instruction. (EH)

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SOCIAL STUDIES "ON THE BACKBURNER": VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

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SOCIAL STUDIES "ON THE BACKBURNER": VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

Abstract

Elementary social studies is "on the backburner." Heavy competition for resources, low student interest and teacher concern, and a highly sanitized and educationally uneven curriculum are among the conditions underlying its underrepresentation. Among the various effects of this backburner status, limited opportunity for substantive social development is perhaps the most important. Effectively removing the social studies from the backburner will require an understanding of the interrelated nature of the underlying conditions and an appreciation of the classroom practitioners' considerable influence upon curriculum and instruction.

SOCIAL STUDIES "ON THE BACKBURNER": VIEWS FROM THE FIELD

> Social studies is one of the things you put on the back-burner--everything else has to be brought first....It's what we do when we have time left over. (Second grade teacher, 21 years experience)

Personal development for the greater good of society has long been a primary and explicit focus of the social studies (Hertzberg, 1981; Nelson, 1992; Stanley, 1985).1 Although specific emphases and approaches vary, most social educators advocate some form of individual citizenship development as a means of promoting broad societal improvement. Whether achieved through the cultivation of a critical social perspective (e.g., Giroux, 1985), an ethic of caring or community (Greene, 1988; Noddings, 1992), or the knowledge, skills and values necessary for responsible civic action (e.g., Banks, 1987; Barr, Barth & Shermis, 1977; Newmann, 1975), the underlying premise of the social studies is that some form of individual social development is necessary for the greater good of society.

Thus construed, social studies could be essential to the development of personal and societal well-being. Nonetheless, the subject is underrepresented in the nation's elementary schools. It is allocated less instructional time than was once the case and is frequently given little more than perfunctory consideration in curriculum reform proposals (Goodlad, 1984; Gross, 1977; Hahn,

1985; Lengel & Superka, 1982; NCSS Taskforce on Early Childhood/Elementary Social Studies, 1989; Shaver, 1989).

The purpose of this report, based on a study conducted in Delaware, is to examine the relationship between the status of the elementary social studies and the goal of personal development for the greater good of society.2 First, I will describe teachers' perspectives on the definition and value of the social studies. Next, I will examine the status of the social studies in Delaware and the conditions underlying that status. Finally, I will discuss general implications for improving the status of the elementary social studies. Before proceeding to the findings, brief discussions of the theoretical framework and research methodology are in order.

Theoretical Framework

This report draws upon three basic assumptions. First, human activity is mediated by interpretation (e.g., Neisser, 1976; Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Wertsch, 1991). Our actions are influenced by personal goals and perspectives. Sometimes these influences are contradictory in nature. Desire for personal independence, for example, may counterbalance the wish for social belongingness (e.g., Hewitt, 1991), and personal perspectives on issues such as freedom, democracy and justice may vary according to experience and circumstance (e.g., Greene, 1988).

To the extent that one goal or perspective contradicts another, conflicts may arise that require reconciliation. While

these conflicts often exist externally, between individuals, internal conflicts arise as well. Thus, it is possible for individuals, including teachers, to experience internal tension between professional and personal goals, between efficacy and safety needs, and so forth.

The second assumption is that learning requires a mental struggle with information not yet understood. Psychological development results from the ongoing effort to reconcile existing perspectives with environmental experiences that challenge those perspectives (Anderson, 1985; Neisser, 1976; Piaget, 1972). By extension, social development (i.e., the psychological development of social perspectives) would seem to require the contemplation of dissonant social views, conditions and relationships.

The third premise is that within a democratic and pluralistic society, if any individual or group is required to challenge its existing beliefs, all individuals and groups should be expected to do the same. Members of the dominant culture should be just as self-reflective and self-critical as any other individual or sociocultural group.3

Although this ideal is reflected in our national rhetoric, it is far from being a social reality. Instead, ongoing resistance to the critical examination of dominant perspectives and practices has resulted in sanitized social curricula (e.g., Anyon, 1979; Banks, 1987, 1989). Similar concerns are at the center of pluralist arguments against cultural assimilation in education and

society (Baldwin, 1988; Greene, 1993; Nieto, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1988).

Research Participants, Context and Methodology

The research methodology was qualitative in nature. Although varied approaches were used to gather the data, an interpretivist perspective compatible with the research focus and theoretical framework was utilized to guide inquiry and analysis (Berg, 1989; Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Jacob, 1987; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

One of the basic tenets of the qualitative, or interpretivist, paradigm is that human activity is mediated by personal interpretation of context-specific experiences within particular social settings (Jacob, 1987). Rather than responding in some mindless, universal way to environmental (e.g., physical, social) stimuli, human thought and action are influenced by the interpretation of specific environmental conditions and the integration of these conditions with personal goals, interests and concerns.

Thus, the primary value of qualitative research lies not in the verification and generalization of universal truths, but in the rich description and thoughtful explanation of complex processes, relationships and environmental influences. It seeks to describe the actions of particular individuals (in this case, the social studies practices of elementary teachers) and to explain the perspectives and environmental contexts underlying those

actions. The aims of this report are consistent with the goals of the qualitative research paradigm.

The Social Context

Although Delaware is in some ways distinct (e.g., it is one of the smallest states both in population and geographical size), it shares important sociocultural and educational characteristics with many other states. To the extent that such factors ultimately influence classroom practice, understanding the broader context of the social studies in Delaware may provide valuable insight for the field in general.

Sociocultural Factors

As in many other states, Delaware's sparsely populated and ethnically homogeneous areas are balanced by densely populated and culturally diverse regions, its highly industrialized regions are offset by agricultural areas, and extreme wealth is contrasted with acute poverty.

The 1990 census indicated that the state population was approximately 80% European American and 17% African American, with the remaining 3% of the population distributed among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Eskimos [Inuit] and Aleut, and various "other" ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1990). However, this distribution was unevenly reflected in districts and schools throughout the state. For example, while African Americans comprised less than

10% of the student population in some schools, they exceeded 40% of the population in other schools.

In addition to uneven ethnic distribution, school populations varied economically as well. While a handful of elementary schools reported that 5% or fewer of their students lived below the poverty line, five other schools reported that 50% or more of their students lived in poverty. More than one fifth of the public elementary schools in Delaware reported 30% or more of their students living below the poverty line.

Educational Climate

Like many other states, Delaware is currently involved in school reform initiatives. During the last several years the state has engaged in a massive curriculum restructuring effort aimed at developing "content standards" for Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies, and statewide assessment tools to be administered in grades 3, 5, 8 and 10. The revision of each subject is spearheaded by a 45 member "Framework Commission" represented by teachers, parents, students, administrators, college and university faculty, and members of business and industry.

According to the most recent draft of the social studies standards, the four most important disciplines to provide a foundation for responsible citizenship are history, geography, economics and civics (Delaware Social Studies Framework Commission, 1994). "Multicultural perspectives" and "social issues" are identified as important lenses through which to view these four

primary disciplines. The assessment tools include grade-level performance tasks that seek to evaluate higher order thinking (e.g., critical analysis, problem-solving, application of knowledge) and the demonstration of proficiencies rather than the mere selection of correct answers.

Although history, geography, economics and civics are highlighted in the 1994 draft, they have also been heavily emphasized in prior state and district curriculum standards (e.g., State Board of Education, 1990) and in the social studies textbooks that often serve as de facto curricula within the classroom (e.g., Thornton, 1992). What has changed, perhaps, is the level of specific attention to multicultural education and social issues, along with a "less is more" philosophy that maximizes the four disciplines while minimizing or eliminating disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and psychology.

The Participants

Data were gathered by four means, including: (1) a statewide survey of district level social studies supervisors (or their equivalents), (2) a statewide survey of elementary school representatives (e.g., teachers, principals), (3) interviews with 20 teachers throughout the state, and (4) the collection of documents (e.g., state and district curriculum guides, state census information).

The district survey was mailed to 15 of the 19 public school districts in Delaware. (The four remaining districts were excluded

because their programs do not include elementary schools housed within the state.) Each superintendent was asked to select a district representative (i.e., "a district level social studies supervisor" or equivalent) to complete the survey. Since few districts employed "social studies supervisors" as such, most of the surveys were completed by district level curriculum specialists. Twelve of the fifteen districts responded to the surveys, yielding an overall return rate of 80%

The school level survey was disseminated to all 112 public schools in Delaware serving any combination of grades between K and 6. Each principal was asked to select an appropriate school representative. The respondents included a combination of grade-level team leaders, teachers working on school level social studies curricula, vice-principals, and principals. Responses from 75% of the schools (N=84) representing 27 different grade-level combinations (e.g., K-2, pre-K-3, K plus 4-6, 1-6, 6-8) were returned.

The 20 teachers were selected on the basis of grade level, teaching experience, geographical location (e.g., southern or northern portion of the state; urban, suburban or rural school setting), the approximate gender distribution of teachers within elementary classrooms, and the ethnic profile of the state. Based on these factors, a stratified sampling approach (e.g., Gay, 1987) was utilized to select the teachers to be interviewed. School principals and classroom practitioners were contacted until the desired representation of participants was achieved.

Therefore, among the 20 teachers interviewed, 17 were women and three were men, 17 were European American and three were African American. Eleven of the interviewees taught in grades K-3, and nine taught in grades 4-6. No grade level was represented by fewer than two teachers or by more than four. The experience level of the interviewees ranged from two to 23 years. Approximately two thirds of the teachers had either earned advanced degrees or were enrolled in graduate programs at the time of the interviews.

The Research Tools

The Surveys

Although the wording varied and certain items were added or eliminated as needed, the district and school level surveys were similar in both method and substance. Both sets of surveys contained Likert scales, rank-ordered items, and open-ended questions and statements calling for brief written responses. And both sets of surveys were developed around the same five categories.

The five major categories included: (1) demographic information (e.g., average student enrollment, student ethnic and economic status), (2) social studies curriculum and instruction (e.g., most/least common instructional practices and evaluation procedures, typical scope and sequence, textbooks and materials, average instructional time per week), (3) the status of the social studies (e.g., relative to other subjects), (4) the influence of

recent developments (e.g., national studies and reports, political trends) upon local policy and practice, and (5) priorities for future social studies development.

Most survey items were divided into separate categories for the primary and upper grades. In these cases, items eliciting responses for "grades K-3" were immediately replicated for "grades 4-6."

Open-ended questions and statements requesting a narrative response were among the most useful survey items. For instance, district representatives were asked to respond to the following statement:

> Although the district curriculum guide plans for 1-6 articulation in the social studies curriculum and for articulation with secondary social studies courses, most teachers ignore the guide. In practice, the knowledge, skills, and values that students learn in social studies in one grade are rarely connected to what they learn in the next grade.

Responses to this statement varied from claims that curricular continuity was not a problem in "District X," to assertions about the need for greater district control over local practices, to indignation at the suggestion that centralized policing was either possible or desirable. Items such as this provided valuable insight on a variety of perspectives and settings.

The Interviews

Unlike the surveys, the interviews were explicitly designed to examine practitioners' perspectives on their particular roles, teaching contexts, and social studies goals and approaches. The teachers were asked to describe their personal teaching philosophies and environments and the influence of these factors upon their social studies curriculum and practice.

The interviews were semi-structured (e.g., Berg, 1989). Although an initial set of questions guided the conversation, adequate space was provided to pursue unanticipated but important issues that emerged during the interview. In several cases, follow-up interviews were arranged to further explore topics of importance to the teacher or interviewer. Typical items included:

1. How would you define social studies? What is it for? Is there any real value or need for social studies? Explain.
2. Describe a typical social studies unit or lesson in your class.
3. Under optimum conditions, what would you want your students to learn in social studies?
4. What kinds of things influence what you actually end up teaching? Explain.

Findings

The surveys and interviews yielded important information about the status of the social studies in Delaware and the various

conditions underlying that status. Specifically, this section describes: (1) the participants' perspectives on the content and value of social education, (2) the influence of those perspectives upon the status of the social studies in Delaware, and (3) the relationship between this status and the larger goal of personal development for the greater social good.

The Definition and Value of the Social Studies

In addition to the open-ended survey items administered to district and school representatives, the teacher interviewees were asked to define "social studies," to discuss their views on its value or purpose, and to describe the kinds of social studies activities conducted in their classrooms. Based on these data typical content areas were identified, along with a sense of the teachers' views on the primary value of the social studies. The content areas consisted of history, geography and multicultural education, with some attention also given to subjects such as economics. The major value of the social studies, according to the participants, involved socializing the child into the larger society.

Variations on history and geography permeated the data. When asked how she would define the social studies, for example, a sixth grade teacher responded, "It's actually a combination of things, as far as I can see: History, geography, current affairs, how people relate to their world--their environment."

In addition to history and geography, multicultural education was also a growing priority. As one school representative wrote, "We...are in touch with people throughout the world on a daily basis. Multicultural education from a social studies perspective is crucial in preparing our young people for their world of today and tomorrow."

While history, geography and multicultural education were considered central to the social studies, the primary value of the field was related not so much to a particular content area as to a developmental process. Time and again the participants indicated that socializing the child into the larger community (e.g., the classroom, the neighborhood, the nation) was an essential aspect of the social studies. As a first grade teacher stated, the value of the social studies is "mostly for social development. When I think of social studies, I think of getting along with others--learning how to be cooperative."

A fifth grade teacher shared a similar perspective:

> [Social studies involves] learning to cooperate with others. It's building not only self-esteem but skills that you need to get along in the world....Like in real life you can do your job really well, but if you cannot get along and cooperate and follow the rules of the business and society, you can get fired.

Although the teachers' perspectives and state and local curricula were far from isomorphic, the various sources of data

converged on at least two important points: Elementary social studies in Delaware consists primarily of teaching history, geography and multicultural education, and socializing the individual child into broader society is a pervasive underlying concern. The next section examines the relationship between the status of the social studies, thus defined, and the larger goal of promoting personal development for the greater good of society.

Social Studies "On the Backburner"

Like social studies across the nation, social studies in Delaware is undervalued and underrepresented in the elementary classroom. As a fourth grade teacher in a suburban neighborhood stated, "(S)ocial studies is...one of those things that's kind of tacked onto the end...You know, if you need to do extra math, the first thing you cut is social studies and science."

Nor was this view limited to the upper grades. A second grade teacher with 21 years experience seemed to express the views of many when she said, "It seems like social studies is one of the things you put on the backburner--everything else has to be brought first....It's what we do when we have time left over." The notion that the social studies is "on the backburner" was supported by the surveys as well the interviews. Figures 1a and 1b indicate the status of nine major subjects, as interpreted by the district and school representatives. Mean scores are shown for each of the rank ordered items, with 1 considered most important and 9 considered least important.

	District	School
1	reading(X=1.5)	reading(X=1.0)
2	mathematics(X=2.2)	mathematics(X=2.3)
3	language arts(X=2.5)	language arts(X=2.5)
4	science(X=3.8)	science(X=4.3)
5	social studies(X=4.7)	social studies(X=4.7)
6	art(X=6.1)	physical education(X=6.5)
7	physical education(X=6.2)	art(X=6.8)
8	music(X=7.1)	music(X=6.9)
9	foreign languages(X=7.9)	foreign languages(X=8.5)

Figure 1a. Status of nine major school subjects in grades K-3.

	District	School
1	reading(X=1.0)	reading(X=1.1)
2	mathematics(X=2.4)	mathematics(X=2.1)
3	language arts(X=2.6)	language arts(X=2.5)
4	science(X=4.4)	science(X=4.1)
5	social studies(X=4.5)	social studies(4.5)
6	art(X=6.0)	physical education(X=6.5)
7	music(X=6.7)	art(X=6.9)
8	physical education(X=6.9)	music(X=6.9)
9	foreign languages(X=8.7)	foreign languages(X=7.7)

Figure 1b. Status of nine major school subjects in grades 4-6.

Although social studies was ranked fifth in each instance, careful examination reveals little cause for optimism. The objects ranked below the social studies, which the participants commonly referred to as "specials," were considered supplementary rather than essential. These subjects were taught by specialists two or three days a week (if they were taught at all) rather than by the regular classroom teacher on a daily basis. The fact that social studies was ranked just ahead of the "specials" actually reinforces the notion that social education is relegated to secondary status within the overall curriculum.

The conditions underlying the backburner status are numerous and complex. Nonetheless, three broad, interrelated explanations emerged from the data. These include: (1) competition for limited resources, (2) the conception of social studies as uninteresting and unimportant, and (3) a general reluctance to critique dominant social perspectives and practices.

Competition for Resources

The most common explanation for the underrepresentation of the social studies involved the limited availability of resources. Like other programs across the nation, elementary teachers in Delaware believe the curriculum is overcrowded: There is too much to be done and too little time, money or material resources with which to do it. When asked, for example, what kinds of things influence her social studies decision-making, a suburban second

grade teacher responded without hesitation, "Time, [and] the overwhelming sense of so many other things to cover."

A school representative described the impact of the overcrowded curriculum: "Too many items are mandated by the Department of Public Instruction to be included in the curriculum. Nothing is taken out. Hence, social studies... get(s) squeezed into a lower priority."

Indeed, social studies was sometimes eliminated altogether. A fourth grade teacher observed the following:

> The third grade is required to take the SAT test and [this year] our third grade teachers were--now this was an administrative push--the administrators, all they were telling everybody was "Our test scores need to be higher. Our test scores need to be higher." So what the third grade teachers in our building did is they stopped teaching social studies and science for a whole month and taught extra math and English. So the kids did not get any social studies or science for at least a month. And amazingly so [spoken with a tone of irony], our test scores went up.

In addition to time constraints, the social studies also competed for financial and material resources. In response to an inquiry about program development, an exasperated school representative wrote:

> We have a good social studies program now. Instead of worrying about it, get us atlases, maps, globes, software, books, videotapes and other materials to use and get us some funds for travel to museums and historical sites and for talented guest speakers. We can't afford a subscription to a newspaper. We know what to do and how to do it but can't keep hiding the fact we have no resources to make us more effective. When we spend at least $200 per student on supplies and materials--then ask us again about program improvements.

Similar frustration was expressed by a second grade teacher: "What I feel is really detrimental to me and everyone else there is that, yeah we have to teach [the mandated curriculum], but they don't give us anything...to teach from." She continued, "(W)e have absolutely no textbook to draw from. Not that I would rely totally on the textbook, but at least to see something that has been approved by the district....We're pretty much left on our own."

Teachers responded to the competition for resources by reducing the quantity of social studies instruction. The remaining instruction was either isolated or integrated into the overall curriculum. Curriculum isolation was most acute when the social studies was relegated to "Friday afternoons," to celebratory holidays, and so forth.

While social studies was sometimes isolated, at other times it was integrated into the overall curriculum. An 18-year veteran

described an approach that intertwined many areas of the curriculum:

> I incorporate all the other areas of the curriculum.... (W)e'll get into science, even through spiders, through the African folk tales of Anansi. And, we'll do scientific observations of an aquarium with spiders in it....And on math we'll write math stories about spiders and 'double facts' because spiders have four plus four legs, eight legs....I believe you try to incorporate everything as much as possible.

Thus, whether isolated or integrated, the ongoing competition for limited resources resulted in an overall reduction in social studies instruction.

Social Studies as Uninteresting and Unimportant

Another factor contributing to the backburner status of the social studies is that the subject is often considered uninteresting and unnecessary. A second grade teacher stated quite simply, "Social studies is not one of my favorite things to do....Science is more interesting."

Even a sixth grade teacher involved in state-level social studies curriculum development acknowledged that disinterest was an important issue:

> Boredom...(is) the first impediment to kids' learning...there's just so much that I want the kids to

get [but] I don't want them to die of boredom in the process.

To stimulate interest in the subject, teachers tried to involve students in stimulating, "hands-on" (i.e., experience-based) activities. For example, the sixth-grade teacher involved in curriculum development sought to counter student boredom with "high interest stimulation." Similarly, a first grade teacher noted that effective social studies instruction consists of "'hands-on' activities where the children get involved."

Not only was social studies considered uninteresting, but many saw it as unnecessary as well. This point was implied by the survey data (see Figures 1a and b, for example) as well as the interviews. As one sixth grade teacher with twenty-three years experience bluntly asserted, "Social studies isn't a priority. People just don't seem to see a need."

Thus, social studies was often viewed as uninteresting and unimportant. These views contributed to the reduction, and in some cases the outright elimination, of social studies instruction. Teachers sought to counter student boredom by making the remaining instruction as "stimulating," "hands-on," and otherwise interesting as possible.

The Sanitized Curriculum

Although competition for resources and a lack of interest and concern help explain the backburner status of the social studies,

they do not fully account for its underrepresentation within the overall curriculum. As the study proceeded it became clear that these conditions were related to a much larger problem.

In spite of open-ended and probing questions about the definition, importance and method of the social studies, there was little indication that dissonant social information was included in the curriculum. Teachers appeared particularly reluctant to critique dominant social norms, and in some cases they openly resented such efforts. The few teachers who did encourage their students to critique the dominant social system experienced considerable opposition and very little support.

For example, although several participants identified "economics" as an important social studies subject, there was little indication that it was approached critically. Specific references were limited to activities such as "mini-society," an elaborate simulation approach used to teach about the principles and processes of the "free market" system. Under the best of circumstances, such programs address problems within the economic system (e.g., they encourage students to delineate between "wants" and "needs," they note the tension between unlimited wants and finite resources) while stopping short of critiquing the system itself.

Failure to critique the fundamental premises or ethics of existing social systems (whether economic, political, or otherwise) restricts incentive to contemplate viable alternatives. In turn, failure to contemplate alternatives contributes to the perpetuation

of the existing system. Perhaps even more important, reluctance to challenge students' fundamental social assumptions precludes the cognitive dissonance required for substantive social development. Indeed, among the 96 surveys and 20 personal interviews, barely a handful of comments implied any substantive critique of existing economic or political systems.

Reluctance to critique the dominant social structure was also evident in multicultural education. Although multicultural education was strongly advocated by many participants, conceptions of "culture" were often narrow and uncritical. One teacher, for example, characterized her efforts as doing "the cultural holiday thing." Another teacher noted that multicultural education is "overinundated with Martin Luther King, Jr." Overall, it appeared that politically safe heroes and exotic "life styles" were far more likely areas of focus than were the substantive philosophical perspectives or diminished "life chances" of dominated sociocultural groups.4

To better understand the nature and underlying conditions of the sanitized curriculum, consider the response of a fourth grade teacher when asked whether there was any real need for the social studies:

> I feel like the kids need to be aware...It's important in how you do things in life, you know. If you don't know what's happening in the Persia Gulf--if you don't know a war is coming, it might catch you by surprise!

This teacher acknowledged the need to be aware of important social issues and events (e.g., the Persian Gulf War). However, such awareness was viewed more as a means of preserving existing social conditions (e.g., personal safety and national security, which would be threatened if the war were to "catch you by surprise") than critiquing--much less changing--those conditions. No mention was made, for example, of the value of encouraging students to critique the range of motives underlying U.S. involvement in the Gulf War.

This was not an isolated case. Few participants seemed inclined to challenge the efficacy or ethics of prevailing social perspectives. When such issues were raised, discussion tended to be tentative or non-committal. For example, a first grade teacher with 17 years experience was asked whether she believed part of the teacher's role involves "changing society in general":

> I don't think about that in first grade. But in a way, yeah. If they don't do it, who's going to?...My first impression is, 'Well, parents should be doing that.' But if parents aren't teaching kids how to show respect --how to get along with others--then teachers have to do it.

This response is informative for several reasons. Initially, the teacher acknowledged that she simply did not think about social change as part of her present role. She noted that social change is the parent's job rather than the province of the public

educator. However, she then conceded that if parents either cannot or will not socialize their children to "show respect" or to "get along with others," the responsibility falls upon the teacher.

Perhaps the most important aspect of such responses was that "social change" was perceived in limited terms. While often equated with changing individuals or groups who deviate from dominant societal norms (e.g., those who do not "respect" others, those who do not "get along" in society), social change was seldom viewed in terms of changing the norm itself.

For example, there was little indication that students were asked to consider that not all perspectives (e.g., bigotry, racism, greed) are equally deserving of "respect" or that "getting along" is always best for society. There was even less indication that students were encouraged to address the various forms of bigotry, racism and greed institutionalized within the dominant social structure. While it is certainly important to provide affirming experiences for every child, emotional safety should not and need not preclude intellectually sound personal and social critique (e.g., Nieto, 1992; Paley, 1992).

Conflicting goals

Among the many factors contributing to the sanitized curriculum, teachers were particularly concerned with their own professional, social and personal preservation. Preservation of professional status was a specific concern for the second grade teacher who earlier argued that "they don't give us anything...to

teach from...that has been approved by the district." She was asked how she felt about her curriculum decisions being "strongly decided by the team":

> Sometimes I feel limited, then I feel safe because I know that we're all covering the same ideas--and then we get back to the old accountability situation. Then parents can't come back to us and say that Mrs. So-and-so did this, why didn't you cover this?

Thus, the teacher's reliance upon district sanctioned materials was part of a larger effort to shield herself from criticism. However, to the extent that the need for professional preservation restricts instructional flexibility based upon social critique and self-reflection, the goal of maintaining professional security begins to contradict the goal of providing quality social education.

Although presenting dissonant social information was seldom identified as important to the social studies, this was not exclusively the case. A sixth grade teacher with nine years experience provided insight to the difficulty of addressing such issues:

> I think maybe we can learn from our life styles too, some things that we do wrong. And we can assess our own culture and say "Maybe we're not quite right. We call ourselves civilized, but are we civilized?" We can look at the Indians who lived here for thousands of (years) and never damaged the

> land....And yet here we are with our briefcases and our three piece suits and our cars and our roads and our high rise apartments and we say that we're civilized. Yet we do a lot of damage and it seems like we have a lot of problems that go along with just this life style...You need to study that. You need to look at it and think about it and make judgements for yourself.

As he continued, it became clear that this teacher's approach entailed some risk:

> A lot of curriculum choices are made once that door is shut...Once I shut that door, you know, they can more or less say "Well, here's the content you should try to cover." [But] I'm going to sort of do it my way and what I feel is important.

In addition to professional preservation, social and personal concerns also restricted the presentation of dissonant social information. This was the case with a white fourth grade teacher who responded to a black student's public charge that she was "prejudiced." According to the teacher, the event occurred shortly after she had been complemented by another student:

> Then this boy raises his hand and he says, "You know, I have two friends who were fourth-graders a couple of years ago and both of them said that you and this teacher and this teacher, all three of you, were prejudiced." There's this hushed

> silence that kind of covered the room as this boy said this. The kids were all kind of looking around and most of them were just wide-eyed with terror that I was going to just kind of let go on this kid because he more or less just called his teacher "prejudiced."

Rather than postponing or isolating her response, or silencing the student altogether, the teacher decided to pursue the issue publicly--in the setting in which the interaction had been initiated. The result was a 30 minute discussion in which the teacher asked the student to support his claim with personal experience and observations. The class discussed both the seriousness of prejudicial thinking and action, and the seriousness of charging someone with being prejudiced. In this way, the teacher used the opportunity to encourage her students to think both critically and reflectively about prejudice.

Several months later, the teacher reflected upon the experience:

> I didn't realize at the time that it was a huge social studies lesson....I didn't expect it to go in the direction that it did, and I certainly didn't expect it to go on for the length of time that it did, [but] I knew that it was time well spent.

Indeed, it had been "time well spent." In a 30 minute class discussion the teacher not only challenged a student to examine the evidence upon which he had based a serious personal judgement,

but she did so in a way that suggested neither she nor anyone else who is socially, economically or politically more powerful, is beyond reproach. Rather than dismissing the student's accusation, this teacher acknowledged the fear it aroused in her and struggled to reconcile the teacher-student relationship:

> Part of me still wonders in the back of his mind if he is not thinking to himself [that I am prejudiced]...I'm not trying to defend myself--although I guess I am trying to prove something to him....It's always in the back of my head. Part of me is saying, you cannot treat him or respond to his behavior differently just because you have this fear.

The teacher's satisfaction was further diffused when she recounted the event to several fellow teachers and a couple of personal friends:

> One of my friends reacted, "Why did you even allow a kid to say that?"....I'm not sure that anyone who I told the story to said I handled it well...I think everyone was like, "You spent 30 minutes doing <u>that</u>!?"

The effort of those who risked their own security to address difficult social issues takes on even greater significance when contrasted against one teacher's views on the teaching of revisionist history:

> I'm trying to adjust without giving in to--what do you call it--revisionist history....I have some people working in my

school, and I'm not sure where the funding comes from, but their whole purpose is supporting black students--the minority students. Well, some of the stuff that the kids are being told down there just kind of boggles my mind. Like Columbus didn't discover America,...Cleopatra was a Black woman--that kind of stuff. I want to see some credible support for it. I'm not teaching it just because it suits somebody's purpose.

She continued:

What it's really doing is causing divisiveness that wasn't there before. At least I didn't know it was there and none of the [other] teachers did [either]....I think somebody's planting some bad seeds here to make the kids feel like "The only history that you really want to hear is the history of your own race."

This teacher's reluctance to entertain alternative historical perspectives was based on the grounds that such alternatives are unsupported by empirical evidence. However, she apparently failed to consider that those responsible for privileging particular historical perspectives and standards often benefit most by those perspectives and standards (e.g., Baldwin, 1988; Greene, 1993; Noddings, 1992; Ogbu, 1987; Zinn, 1980). In failing to entertain even the possibility that alternative standards and perspectives may have merit, she denied both herself and her students a vital

opportunity for social development through critical self-examination.

Discussion and Conclusion

Elementary social studies in Delaware is defined largely in terms of history, geography and multicultural education, and socializing the child into the larger community is a primary underlying concern. Thus defined and practiced, social studies is undervalued and underrepresented within the overall curriculum. Heavy competition for resources, student disinterest, failure to view the subject as important, and a reluctance to present dissonant social information are among the many conditions that contribute to its backburner status.

It is tempting to address each of these underlying conditions in isolation. However, these factors and many others actually interact to perpetuate the underrepresentation of the social studies. For example, it is not difficult to understand reduced instruction in a program viewed as personally irrelevant by some and flatly demeaning by others. Similarly, it is not unlikely that students consider social studies uninteresting precisely because much of the inherently interesting (e.g., controversial, personally relevant and socially challenging) material has been eliminated from the curriculum.

The larger point is that the conditions underlying the backburner status of the social studies are overlapping and interrelated. Procuring additional resources without

simultaneously attending to the sanitized curriculum is unlikely to promote substantive social development. Nor are isolated attempts to raise social consciousness a viable substitute for ongoing social critique.

Addressing difficult social issues was perhaps the riskiest and least developed response to the backburner status. The competition for resources, low student interest, and lack of concern were addressed in a variety of ways (e.g., by reducing, isolating and integrating instruction; by making the remaining lessons as stimulating as possible). However, critiquing the system itself was a far more difficult matter. Partially because of the general socializing orientation of the subject, and partly because teacher autonomy conflicted with the goals of maintaining professional, social and personal safety, there was often a price to pay for challenging dominant social perspectives and practices.

For one teacher, the price entailed closing the classroom door and operating in secrecy. For another, it involved the loss of valuable instructional time and considerable risk to her professional status and personal identity. Even when the teacher who had been called "prejudiced" risked a candid and public discussion with her accuser, and even though she was justifiably satisfied with her efforts, her actions were misunderstood and ultimately rejected by her friends as well as her peers.

This teacher faced her own fears in a way few may be willing to do. In so doing, she demonstrated that the underrepresentation of quality social studies instruction results as much from a desire

to protect personal identity and social position as from any professional conviction. Her response is all the more remarkable when contrasted against the uncritical approach to the Gulf War, or against the teacher who viewed the contemplation of alternative standards and historical perspectives as an indication that "bad seeds" were being sown.

Finally, any subject that simultaneously assimilates diverging individuals into the sociocultural mainstream while exempting the dominant culture from critical self-examination helps perpetuate an educational situation that is not only undemocratic, but educationally unsound. While the views and actions of some students are challenged, the beliefs and practices of others remain unexamined. To the extent that social development involves the contemplation of dissonant social information, the dominant culture is denied opportunity for substantive social growth. And to the extent that our social ideals imply shared opportunity in the shaping of society, the sociocultural "other" is denied a fundamental democratic right.

In conclusion, the backburner status of the social studies involves more than physical or temporal underrepresentation. Perhaps the representation of greatest significance involves real opportunity for each student and teacher to contemplate truly difficult social information. Until this issue is adequately addressed, some teachers will continue to risk personal, social and professional security, others will strive to stimulate interest in inherently uninteresting material, and all will struggle with

inevitable resistance to unidirectional socialization. When teachers are supported for their efforts to grapple with difficult social issues, and when educators at all levels begin to contemplate alternative standards and perspectives, we can begin to speak legitimately of removing the social studies from the backburner.

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Endnotes

1. Of course, there are differing views on what constitutes the "greater good" of society and how it might be achieved. The essential point of this paper is that social studies is ultimately concerned with promoting societal well-being, in some form or another.

2. The data drawn upon for this paper were collected as part of a larger study of the status of the social studies in Delaware (see Thornton & Houser, 1994). The project was done under the auspices of the Center for Educational Leadership and Evaluation, College of Education, University of Delaware.

3. This report follows Nieto's (1992) use of the terms "dominant culture" and "dominated cultures" to distinguish between the European American "mainstream" and sociocultural groups that have been systematically dominated by the ideologies and actions of that mainstream. Although there is no clear demarkation between dominant and dominated cultures (i.e., to some degree, "dominance" is relative and context specific) and the terms should therefore be interpreted cautiously, the notion that some cultures have been dominated by others is central to this paper.

4. This "life style" versus "life chances" distinction is drawn from Bullivant (1986). Banks (1987) also borrows this terminology to argue convincingly for a more substantive approach to multicultural education within the social studies.